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ABSTRACT

This presentation aims to explain the practical application of the World Wide Web as a primary tool for creating a learner-centered classroom. Based on Terry O'Banion's book, A Learning College for the 21st Century, a model that places learning and the learner first is proposed. Six key principles are explained and are utilized as the guiding assumptions in Maricopa Community Colleges' learner-centered paradigm. The six key elements of the learning classroom are as follows: (1) The learning classroom creates substantive change in individual learners; (2) The learning classroom engages learners as full partners in the learning process; (3) The learning classroom creates and offers as many options for learning as possible; (4) The learning classroom assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities; (5) The learning classroom defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners; and (6) The learning classroom and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its readers. In this paper, the concept of a learner-centered paradigm is specifically applied in a freshman composition classroom by primarily using the World Wide Web. Student-created websites are employed as interactive learning tools. These websites assist in academic writing and publications, connecting with classmates and others, and practical learning skills. Some benefits from such technology include allowing for active participation and collaboration, and providing immediate feedback. (JJL)

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USING THE WORLD WIDE WEB TO CREATE A LEARNER-CENTERED CLASSROOM

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presented at NISOD 1999 International Conference on Teaching & Leadership Excellence

While educators are familiar with the World Wide Web as a presentation medium, many are unaware of its value as a learning tool in the classroom. This presentation will explain the practical application of the World Wide Web as a primary tool to create a learner-centered classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The mission of the community college is focused on meeting the educational needs of the people living within its geographical boundaries. This community includes recent high school students, re-entry students preparing for new careers or job changes, and students seeking technical skills, as well as remedial students and special-interest students. The mission of Maricopa Community Colleges is to "strive to exceed the changing expectation of our many communities for effective, innovative, student-centered, flexible and lifelong educational opportunities." As the needs of the community change, the effective community college must anticipate these needs, developing programs and courses to prepare students for a rapidly changing world. Traditional teaching methods need to be examined and new, innovative approaches considered for teaching and learning.

In his book, *A Learning College for the 21st Century* (Phoenix: American Council on Education/Oryx Press Series on Higher Education, 1997), Terry O'Banion calls for a new model of education for the community college called the "learning college." This model places learning, and the learner, first in the order of priorities. The learning college is based on six key principles:

- The learning college creates substantive change in individual learners.
- The learning college engages learners as full partners in the learning process, with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices.
- The learning college creates and offers as many options for learning as possible.
- The learning college assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities.
- The learning college defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners.
- The learning college and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its learners.

These assumptions consider the learner first, before other issues. MCCCD has made a commitment to a learner-centered paradigm ("Toward Becoming a Learner-Centered College System" Paul A. Elsner, January, 1996). Emphasis throughout the Maricopa district is on the learner. Putting theory into practice, I have taken the concept of a learner-centered paradigm into my Freshman composition classroom. My goal is to create a learner-centered classroom. The World Wide Web is a most useful tool to accomplish this goal.

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THE WORLD WIDE WEB AS A LEARNING TOOL

The WWW seems to be everywhere--on TV, in newspapers and magazines, and on our desktops. This technology tool has rapidly exploded upon the mainstream of our lives in just a few years. Students entering the college classroom are familiar with the Web from television advertisements, the media, and their own computing experiences. All have heard of the Web, and most students have clicked from website to website at home or their workplace. The visual aspects of the Web are enticing, the point-and-click environment is easy to use, and the communication capabilities are enormous, as seen by the rapid growth of business and commercial websites.

The obvious value of the Web in education is as a delivery method for course materials. Course syllabi, assignments, calendars and due dates are posted on many teacher websites, easily accessible from multiple locations. Placing course materials on a website provides flexibility and convenience for both students and teachers. However, this is simply a technological way to disperse information traditionally presented in a print format. In many cases, very few changes even occur from the print to the digital presentation. In reality, the technology is an "add-on" to the traditional course of instruction rather than a substantive change in instruction.

In the past several years I've developed a half-dozen complex web sites and, in the process, learned a great deal about how to learn. At that time, there were no college classes or seminars available to teach me web page development, so I taught myself from materials on the Web and in collaboration with colleagues. Upon reflection, I realize that the nature of the Web itself changed the way I thought and learned about writing. My writing became tighter, more focused, concise. The effect of the communication became more important than the individual paragraphs and pages. My audience was real and responsive, which motivated me to try new and innovative ways to communicate. I learned to ask for assistance when I couldn't figure out a particularly thorny problem. Collaboration with colleagues also learning to use this new technology was invaluable. I became a more confident, independent learner, a skill I want to share with my students.

My goal of creating a learner-centered classroom required a new approach. Since I was already teaching in a networked classroom, technology tools were available. However, the computers in the English networked classrooms were used, for the most part, for word-processing, some email interaction, and cursory web searches for source material. The networked classroom computers provide students with Internet access through Netscape, disk space on the web for web pages, email, and an assortment of software for word processing and other activities. Obviously, we had been under-utilizing this tool.

My goal of creating a learner-centered classroom is primarily accomplished by using student-created websites as an interactive learning tool. My students use the Web as a learning tool, creating their own websites to publish their writing, connecting with their classmates and others, and practicing learning skills. The technology invites active participation and collaboration, and provides immediate feedback to stimulate and encourage learners. The visible results displayed on a student-created website provide documented feedback to students of their own learning progress. The Web in my learner-centered classroom is much more than a way to distribute a course syllabus; it is the primary tool to teach students how to learn from each other and independently.

SIX KEY ELEMENTS OF THE LEARNING *CLASSROOM*

The learning *classroom* creates substantive change in individual learners.

A goal in my Freshman writing course is for students to learn to communicate written ideas clearly, logically, and effectively. Students write five assignments for print and then rewrite those assignments and publish them on their own website, called a Web Portfolio. In publishing these written assignments to web pages, the students learn the differences between effective communication in both the written and the digital medium. For example, they soon realize that a printed, extended essay does not communicate as effectively when placed on the Web. The nature of the electronic medium, and the expectations of the audience, require a different type of written communication and encourages visual presentation of ideas.

Moreover, students learn to think about writing in a different way--as a communication tool that can be manipulated to best suit different audiences and presentations. They begin to understand the power of the written word, and that this is a tool they can use to communicate their own ideas to a real audience. Computer-assisted writing encourages revision and changes, as it is very easy to try out different presentations and approaches. Thus, students readily experiment with words, sentences and paragraphs to create new texts and place them on their websites for their classmates and the world to view. The feedback they get from each other and from others outside the classroom reinforces the concept of writing as a communication tool they can use in the real world.

The learning *classroom* engages learners as full partners in the learning process, with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices.

The democratizing of the classroom is one step towards creating a learner-centered environment. The integration of technology in the classroom creates changes in learners and teachers. Teachers become learners, and students learn to teach. The teacher's willingness to become a learner is essential. Technological changes in our society have been swift, and many teachers find themselves unprepared to use the new technology, let alone integrate it into their courses. This may be unsettling, unless the teacher can adopt the role of learner. The teacher is no longer the primary source of information, but a valuable resource and facilitator in the classroom. This major shift in roles from the traditional student-teacher relationship creates a substantive change in students, also. The student, not the teacher, becomes the focus of the classroom experiences; learning, not teaching, becomes the primary goal in the classroom. This new partnership of learners teaches students how to learn from many resources: their peers, as well as their teacher, their textbooks, and technological resources.

While technology creates a level playing field for learners and teachers alike, the student-created websites provide many opportunities for students to take responsibility and make choices. Technology is an engaging phenomenon, inviting people to push buttons, click and participate in all sorts of interactive activities. Unlike the traditional classroom lecture, where students passively listen, the computer classroom requires students to actively participate and interact with the software on the monitor. The Web is a rich source of information for writing, but this is a passive activity not much different than reading a textbook. On the other hand, creating a web site is a highly engaging activity, requiring students to manipulate software to produce text and images on a monitor that can be constantly changed and revised to produce a different effect. The student must make dozens of choices that result in the page on his screen. The exercise requires judgment and critical thought and provides instant feedback.

The learning *classroom* creates and offers as many options for learning as possible.

Using the Web offers many options on different levels for students and teachers alike. Students are not place-bound and have access to course materials in the networked classroom, in the computer labs on campus, and at home if they have a computer. While over 60% of our students have computers at home, computers are available for students to use outside of class. Our campus has two computer labs with over 400 computers available to students 7 days a week, from 7 AM to midnight. I've placed course assignments, calendars, tutorials and help guides for software, and much more on the course website for students to access 24 hours a day. Students and teachers are linked via email giving students access to help and support both in and out of the classroom

The web allows students to experiment with different learning styles than the traditional lecture-delivered information. The web is highly interactive. Students seem to enjoy manipulating things, clicking to different web sites searching for information and experimenting with search engines and new ways to find information. Additionally, the knowledge base available on the web is wide and varied, giving students access to resources and sites related to specific topics. Because the technology is relatively new, and few students have created web pages previously, they are encouraged to teach and learn from each other as well as from course information and other web sites. Students actually learn how to learn, a skill they can transfer to all other areas of their life.

The learning *classroom* assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities.

Learning with the web and student-created web sites is a new experience for the majority of students. The course materials and tutorials are available on the web, but students quickly realize that their best source of help and support is the person sitting next to them! This in itself encourages collaboration as the students learn their way around the web and create their own web pages.

The nature of the web is linked and cooperative. The hyperlinks that are the basis of its dynamic nature connect ideas and the people who create them. My students create web sites that they link to their classmates' web sites as well as to other sites in the world. They must work together to accomplish this, and they begin to realize that the world works collaboratively, too. Discussions in the classroom are often continued outside the classroom in electronic discussion groups as they learn that collaboration is not cheating, but a positive and effective way to learn.

The learning *classroom* defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners.

My role as teacher has evolved and merged into one of learner, facilitator, coach, and mentor. I've learned to create and revise web pages by watching students interact with the course materials. I have created an environment which challenges students to learn new skills. Using these course materials, students discern relevance of and through the activities, develop writing skills, develop logical and critical thinking skills, and learn computer skills.

Using the Web as a primary learning tool has changed my in-class time, too. I use less class time for information delivery as the materials, readings, and resources are on each student's computer. I use the Web projected by a data show onto a screen in the classroom for presentations that are clear and easily accessed after class for review. Much of my classroom time is spent guiding students in interacting with materials I've selected for them on the web. We work together to solve problems in writing, web page creation, and using the web. My role is less authoritarian, more supportive, and closer aligned with my personal teaching style.

Because the web technology is new to many students, they have many questions and problems as they publish their writing. I have redefined my work time and now check email frequently during the weekend and other times to answer student questions. While this might be a problem for some, I enjoy the flexibility of answering email from home and don't confine my contact with students to office hours only. The college administration has been supportive of flexible hours and allows me to fulfill some office hour requirements by telecommuting from home.

The learning *classroom* and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its learners.

Student web portfolios provide documentation of improved and expanded learning that is obvious to students. My students publish all of their writing through the semester in their web portfolios. Even though they are encouraged to constantly revise and modify their writing, all students at the end of the semester look back at what they have written and complete a self-assessment of their work. Invariably, they conclude that they have grown and learned as writers when they compare their first assignments with their final writings.

Another method of assessment is the questionnaire that all of our campus computer-assisted writing students fill out about midway through the semester. Students answer questions about their use of computers in the writing classroom and provide information as to how they feel it has helped them in their course work. The results of these questionnaires over the years have shown that more and more of our students have computers, feel that the computer makes writing easier for them, and prefer to take future writing classes with a computer. Many comments from my own students indicate that they enjoy the web-based delivery of materials and like creating web sites.

My own personal experiences with creating web sites have resulted in improved and expanded learning which I have documented by saving older versions of web sites I've created. A comparison of the original English department web site I created with the current web site shows an increased perception of organizational strategy, more concise writing, and a heightened awareness of audience. All of these are writing skills I now feel I can better teach to my students after learning them through creating a web site. I now teach my students using the same tool that I found so effective for my own learning, the World Wide Web.

A FEW RELATED WEB SITES

Marla's Place
http://glory.gc.maricopa.edu/~mdinchak/welcome.htm

Welcome to ENG101 (course homepage)
http://glory.gc.maricopa.edu/~mdinchak/eng101/index.htm

Glendale Community College, Glendale, AZ
http://www.gc.maricopa.edu/

Dr. Paul Elsner, Chancellor, MCCCD
http://www.dist.maricopa.edu/users/elsner/

THE LEARNING COLLEGE: BOTH LEARNER AND LEARNING CENTERED by Terry O'Banion
http://www.league.org/lelabs0399.html

A Learning College for the 21st Century by Terry O'Banion
http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/lc21_bio.htm